

*DE PROFESSIONE CHRISTIANA AND  
DE PERFECTIONE*

A STUDY OF THE ASCETICAL DOCTRINE OF  
SAINT GREGORY OF NYSSA

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### I

THE ascetical doctrine of Saint Gregory of Nyssa has its roots partly in the earliest tradition of Christian asceticism and partly in the special manifestation of asceticism in his own family, particularly in the lives of Saint Macrina and Saint Basil. A résumé of some of the important facts may prove useful here.

From the beginning ascetics, as those were called who took upon themselves the practice of a rigorous life in their acceptance of Christ's invitation to follow Him, were to be found in every Christian community. A life of continence was their chief concern, but prayer, fasting, the voluntary surrender of their possessions, and various works of charity and zeal were also practiced. They lived at first in their own homes in the midst of the ordinary pursuits of life, governed by the circumstances of their station. Later, as the number of ascetics increased, they were organized by the bishops as a protection from the dangers of worldliness and from the disorders arising from a lack of a prescribed mode of life. Gradually they withdrew from their families to places of seclusion near their own homes where they practiced poverty, chastity, and obedience, and gave themselves up to a life of prayer and penance.

So things proceeded well into the third century when Saint Anthony and Saint Pachomius turned to the ascetical life. Saint Anthony followed this mode of life for the first fifteen years of his ascetical career. He then retired to the desert wastes where he devoted twenty years to a life of absolute solitude before he inaugurated and organized eremitical monasticism for the hermits who had settled near his mountain solitude, attracted thereto by the fame of his virtues and miracles. Saint Anthony's plan was concerned chiefly with the ascetical and mystical principles by which the individual monks were to be guided in living the life of hermits in close proximity to one another. Under his guidance they were left almost entirely free to choose their own practices of asceticism, many of which were austere in the extreme, and they could employ their time as they saw fit.

A few years later Saint Pachomius organized the cenobitical life properly so called. His monks dwelt in a monastery, were bound by a common rule of life, and lived under obedience to a single head. They were permitted, however, some of the freedom of the anchorites in their various ascetical practices, and were like them guided to a great extent by a spirit of indi-

vidualism. So far had Christian asceticism developed at the time Saint Gregory of Nyssa was born.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Gregory of Nyssa came of a family whose role was unusual in the development of the ascetical tradition. He himself gives a number of details concerning its members in his account of the life of his sister Macrina. Both parents were from families distinguished for their wealth, their position, and their holiness. Basil the Elder enjoyed a great reputation not only for his attainments in law and rhetoric, but for his rectitude as well, while Emmelia's strength of character and deeply religious spirit won greater renown than her extraordinary beauty.<sup>2</sup> Five of the ten children adopted the ascetical life, as did also Emmelia herself after the death of her husband.

Macrina, the eldest of the family, upon the death of her betrothed husband when she was but twelve years old, adopted a life of virginity while still in the family household.<sup>3</sup> Later, after her father's death and after suitable marriages had been arranged for her four sisters, this remarkable girl persuaded her mother to enter with her upon a life of asceticism in the retirement of the family estate at Annesi in the Pontus. Here, together with their women servants, whom they treated as equals, they became the center about whom other devout women gathered, some of them women of rank, to lead a life "ordered with a view of imitating that of the angels," as Gregory declares.<sup>4</sup> His description is eloquent. "Continence was their luxury, and obscurity their glory. Their wealth was poverty and the casting away of all worldly superfluities, such as trinkets for the body. Their only care was for divine things and the unceasing round of prayer and endless hymnody, practiced equally by night and day."<sup>5</sup>

Peter, the youngest child, had accompanied his mother and Macrina to their retreat and strove with them, under Macrina's tutelage, "towards the attainment of the angelical life."<sup>6</sup> Later, Naucratius, another brother, had withdrawn with one of the family servants to a life of solitude and piety on

<sup>1</sup> Of the numerous works consulted on the history of asceticism, the following proved most useful: G. Bardy, *La Vie spirituelle d'après les Pères des trois premiers siècles* (Paris, 1935); C. Butler, "Monasticism," in *Cambridge Medieval History*, I (Cambridge, 1911), 521-542; H. Leclercq, "Cénobitisme," in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, II (Paris, 1925), 3047-3248; M. Viller, *La Spiritualité des premiers siècles chrétiens* (Paris, 1930); O. Zöckler, *Askese und Mönchthum* (Frankfurt-a-M., 1897).

<sup>2</sup> *Vita S. Macrinae Virginis*, PG 46, 961A-B; 964B.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 964C; 965A.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 965D.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 969D: . . . Τρυφὴ δὲ ἦν ἡ ἐγκράτεια, καὶ δόξα τὸ μὴ γινώσκεσθαι. Πλοῦτος δὲ ἦν ἡ ἀκτημοσύνη, καὶ τὸ πάσαν τὴν ὑλικὴν περιουσίαν, οἵν τινα κόνιν τῶν σωμάτων, ἀποτυάξασθαι. . . . Μόνη δὲ ἡ τῶν θείων μελέτη, καὶ τὸ τῆς προσευχῆς ἀδιάλευπτον, καὶ ἡ ἄπαντος ὑμνῳδία· κατὰ τὸ ἵστον συμπαρατεινομένη τῷ χρόνῳ, διὰ νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας πάσης . . . .

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 972C-D.

the banks of the Iris, where he practiced perfect obedience to the commands of his mother and cared for the aged sick men of the neighborhood. His tragic death — he and his servant died suddenly while out hunting to provide food for their charges — was an incentive for Macrina and her mother to a life of even greater austerity<sup>7</sup> and may have influenced Basil, the eldest brother, in his renunciation of a brilliant secular career.

It was Macrina, however, who was chiefly responsible for reawakening in Basil his earlier desire for the ascetical life. While at Athens, he and Gregory Nazianzen had planned to lead such a life together,<sup>8</sup> but upon his return from his study abroad, he was, as Gregory of Nyssa (with unconscious humor) puts it, “puffed up beyond measure by the pride of oratory.”<sup>9</sup> Influenced by Macrina, Basil completely renounced his worldly career together with his property, and, Gregory adds, “his life and subsequent acts by which he became renowned throughout the world put into the shade all those who had won renown for their virtue.”<sup>10</sup>

After a journey to Egypt and to Asia Minor to seek guidance concerning the details of asceticism in the centers where the monastic life was flourishing, Basil himself entered upon the ascetical life at Ibora on the Iris, opposite the establishment of his mother and sister. He too became a center, and the ascetics of the Pontus and Cappadocia gathered about him. After six years’ experience of this mode of living, he worked out the principles which are set forth in his *Ascetica*, and thus perfected the cenobitical form of life which he declared superior to the eremitical form. The spirit of the Common Life is the distinctive characteristic of his system of asceticism.<sup>11</sup>

Saint Basil’s conception of the ascetical life, it should be noted, was essentially original not only in its insistence on the common life but also in deriving its inspiration, principles, and the details of its practice entirely from the Scriptures. The monastic life was to Basil’s mind but the perfection of the Christian life.<sup>12</sup> Founded on faith, it obliged those who adopted it to live, in common with others under the guidance of a superior, a life of

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 968A–969A.

<sup>8</sup> Saint Gregory of Nazianzus *Ep.* 1 (PG 37).

<sup>9</sup> PG 46, 965C. Gregory’s addiction to rhetorical extravagance persisted throughout his life, and, during one brief period at least, even caused him to interrupt his ecclesiastical career. On Gregory’s style, cf. L. Méradier, *L’Influence de la seconde sophistique sur l’œuvre de Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris, 1906).

<sup>10</sup> PG 46, 965C: Ἀλλ’ ὁ μὲν ἐκείνου βίος, καὶ τὰ ἐφεξῆς ἐπιτηδεύματα, δι’ ὃν ὀνοματὸς ἐν πάσῃ τῇ ἄνθρωπον γενόμενος, ἀπέκρυψε τῇ δόξῃ πάντας τοὺς ἐν ἀρετῇ διαλάμψαντας.

<sup>11</sup> Sister Margaret Gertrude Murphy, *St. Basil and Monasticism* (Washington, D. C., 1930), 12–13, 94; I have used this admirably documented study along with the better known work of W. K. L. Clarke, *St. Basil the Great, a Study in Monasticism* (Cambridge, 1913).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. P. Humbertclaude, *La Doctrine ascétique de saint Basile de Césarée* (Paris, 1932), p. 104.

renunciation, poverty, prayer, study, and toil, all of which were designed to produce in the soul "fruits worthy of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God."<sup>13</sup>

## II

Such were the essential features of the asceticism which Saint Gregory of Nyssa eventually embraced. At an early age he had become a lector in the Church, but he abandoned this vocation for a career as a professor of rhetoric. This career seems to have been short-lived, for, yielding to the influence that was brought to bear upon him, he gave up the profession of rhetoric and retired to Basil's monastery on the Iris.<sup>14</sup> Here, in an atmosphere suited to his reflective nature, he devoted himself to the practice of the ascetical life and the study of theology.

Ten years later, much against his will, Gregory was obliged by Basil to enter upon what proved to be a stormy episcopal career. As Bishop of Nyssa, owing chiefly to the Arian disaffection in his diocese, he was to experience but brief intervals of the tranquility he had known in his life of retirement. Throughout his many vicissitudes, however, he was constantly preoccupied with the perfection of the spiritual life, as his writings testify, and he availed himself of the opportunities afforded him to set forth the ideals of that life and the means of advancing therein.

## III

His homilies, scriptural writings, and ascetical treatises reveal this preoccupation in a marked degree. Thus, in the *De Vita Moysis*, written at the request of his friend Caesarius, the life of Moses is merely the framework on which is woven Gregory's teaching concerning the mysterious ways by which the soul is brought to perfection. The treatises on the Psalms, *In Psalmorum Inscriptiones*, have chiefly to do with the spiritual life. They treat of the soul's progress through five stages which correspond to the five books of the Psalter. The homilies on the Book of Ecclesiastes, *In Ecclesiasten*, teach the contempt of the things of this earth and the esteem of heavenly goods, while those on the Lord's Prayer, *De Oratione Dominica*, show the relationship between the love of prayer and growth in perfection. The *De Beatitudinibus* shows well how the Beatitudes lend themselves to the development of his doctrine of a progressive ascent toward perfection, but it was in the Canticle of Canticles, with its mystic theme and poetic in-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Murphy, *op. cit.*, 23-28.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Vacant, "Grégoire de Nysse," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (Paris, 1903 ff.), VI, 1847-1852.

spiration, that he found the best medium for his teaching as his treatise, *In Cantica Canticorum*, shows. It is chiefly with the mystical aspect of the spiritual life that Gregory is concerned in these works, but the ascetical aspect receives due attention and the intrinsic unity of the two is manifest.

In the *De Vita Sanctae Macrinae* and the five so-called ascetical treatises, *De Professione Christiana*, *De Perfectione*, *De Instituto Christiano*, *De Castigatione*, and *De Virginitate*, it is with asceticism that Gregory is particularly concerned. The *De Vita Sanctae Macrinae* and the *De Virginitate* are the best known of these writings. The *De Virginitate* seems to have been largely the consequence of Gregory's own experience of the ascetical life. It was written at the request of Basil with the aim to arouse in his readers a strong desire for "the perfect life." The work treats of perfection in general, but because "the virtuous life should have for its substructure the love of virginity," this virtue is treated at length and emphasized throughout.<sup>15</sup> It is worthy of note that in this, his first work, written when he was still strongly influenced by his early rhetorical and philosophical training, all the essential features of his spiritual teaching, with but one or two exceptions, are at least touched upon.

The *De Castigatione*, the shortest of the treatises, is of somewhat restricted interest because of its theme. It is addressed to those members of Gregory's flock who were "angered exceedingly at the admonitions of their teacher" and on this account withdrew from the church.<sup>16</sup> The *De Professione Christiana* and the *De Perfectione* are both in the form of a letter and treat of the great Christological dogmas as means of attaining to the perfection of the Christian life. The *De Instituto Christiano* is similar in content, but scholars are now generally agreed that Gregory was not its author.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> PG 44, 389R: Υποκείσθω τούνν ἀντὶ θεμελίου τινὸς τῷ κατ' ἀρετὴν βίῳ ἢ περὶ τὴν παρθενίαν σπουδῆ.

<sup>16</sup> PG 44, 309C.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. G. Marriott, "The *De Instituto Christiano* attributed to Gregory of Nyssa," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 19 (1918), 328–330; A. Wilmart, "La Tradition de l'Hypotypose," *Revue de L'Orient Chrétien*, 21 (1918–19), 412–421; Viller (cited above, note 1), p. 76. According to Dom Wilmart: "Mis en regard des deux traités authentiques *De Professione Christiana* et *De Perfectione*, l'un et l'autre d'un dessein si ferme et d'ailleurs étroitement liés, *De Instituto* n'apparaît pas seulement écrite d'un autre style, mais encore point composée et proprement incohérente (p. 417) . . . L'attribution à saint Grégoire de Nysse . . . ne remonte pas à la plus ancienne tradition; elle n'est et ne peut être qu'une conjecture d'érudit, provoquée par la lecture du prologue et introduite dans l'archétype de nos manuscrits. Il est possible . . . qu'elle remonte au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle, au temps même où les premières collections des ouvrages de Grégoire de Nysse ont commencé de prendre forme. Mieux vaut conclure modestement . . . que l'Hypotypose, une compilation du V<sup>e</sup> ou du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle, nous a été livrée indûment sous le nom Grégoire de Nysse (p. 420 f.)."

On the other hand, Professor Werner Jaeger, who is editing the writings of Saint Gregory of Nyssa at the Institute for Classical Studies at Harvard University, thinks that the problem has not been definitely solved. In a reply to my question he wrote (February 8, 1946): "I

## IV

Gregory regarded the spiritual life as an organic whole. He looked upon it as a realization of the mystery of baptism which, as Saint Paul teaches, makes us die with Christ in order to rise again with Him. The soul dies by the mortification of its sinful tendencies; it rises again by the vivification of the divine powers bestowed upon it in baptism.<sup>18</sup> Gregory also envisioned the spiritual life as a succession of ascents from the summits of which new horizons continually opened out. It was by the practice of a rigorous asceticism that the successive summits were achieved; hence in the Saint's spiritual doctrine, although the ascetical is distinguished from the mystical, there is continuity in the passage from one to the other.<sup>19</sup>

The spiritual teaching of the first three centuries, it will be recalled, was dominantly Christocentric in character. Christ, as the writings of the period testify, was for the early Christians both the source and the model of their holiness. Origen, however, was the first to give definite theological expression to the mysterious relationship which exists between the life of Christ and the life of the Christian. He showed that it is by participation in the Sonship of Christ that the Christian is made a child of God, and pointed out that mystical knowledge is in reality union with the Divine Word. In the fourth century, as a result of the trinitarian and Christological controversies, the person of Christ was given a new emphasis, and Gregory, whose part in combating heresy was an outstanding one, and whose knowledge of

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have been interested in the problem myself, but after working on it for several weeks two years ago I felt that the first step towards its solution had to be the edition of the text. In the mss. here is a text quite different from what we have in the Migne . . . An inquiry into the authenticity can be undertaken only when our collations are more complete. Until then, I feel I have to postpone judgment."

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. Daniélou, *Platonisme et théologie mystique* (Paris, 1944), p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> In *Cantica*, PG 44, 967A: ἐπὶ τὰ μείζω τε καὶ ὑψηλότερα τῆς καρδίας ἀνάβασις, and *De Vita Moysis*, PG 44, 301C: Τάχα γὰρ τὸ οὕτως ἔχειν, ὡς ἀεὶ θέλειν ἐν τῷ καλῷ τὸ πλέον ἔχειν, ἢ τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως τελεότητος ἔστι. It is difficult, however, to determine precisely the various stages of the ascents. Daniélou (*op. cit.*, 17–26) attempts to do so, but he is not entirely successful. Humbertclaude (cited above, note 12) maintains that the five degrees of Saint Gregory (*In Psalmorum Inscriptiones*, PG 44, 449–485) do not differ fundamentally from the three ways of Saint Basil, but I. Hausherr ("Les Grands courants de la spiritualité orientale," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, I, 1935, 129, note 2) thinks that Humbertclaude gives a false impression of Saint Basil by this classification.

As for continuity in spiritual doctrine, it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that ascetical theology was distinguished from mystical theology in such a way as to exclude unity of doctrine. Cf. R. Garrigou-Lagrange, *Christian Perfection and Contemplation*, translated by Sister M. Timothea Doyle (St. Louis, 1945), pp. 23–43. Recent literature, however, recognizes almost unanimously the continuity and unity of the spiritual life. Asceticism and mysticism represent two distinct degrees; asceticism implies active perfection, mysticism, passive. Cf. A. Stoltz, *The Doctrine of Spiritual Perfection*, translated by A. Williams (London, 1938), pp. 203–208.

Origen's theology was profound, reformed and developed further Origen's Christological teaching.<sup>20</sup> Indeed he was more deeply convinced than any other theological writer of his day of the importance of Christ in the Christian life, particularly in the higher stages of its development. Because the *De Professione Christiana* and the *De Perfectione* illustrate Gregory's Christocentric emphasis, these two treatises form the subject of this study.<sup>21</sup>

## II. THE DE PROFESSIONE CHRISTIANA

The *De Professione Christiana* is in the form of a letter addressed to Harmonius, a friend and disciple, to whom Saint Gregory of Nyssa had promised to write regularly. Gregory whimsically compares himself to those who, having fallen into arrears with their daily taxes, pay the entire sum should they happen to obtain some means. The unusual length of his letter, he explains, is to make it the equivalent of many letters, compensating for those already overdue and anticipating his future lapses as a correspondent, "since for Christians a promise is an obligation." To forestall the danger of the idle talk to which he believed a lengthy letter was conducive, he has striven to preserve throughout the tone of their former conversations, for these, he recalls, had always had to do "with the pursuit of perfection and exercise of piety."

To maintain something of the conversational tone, he has himself assumed the role of Harmonius wherever an objection could be offered to what he has proposed, since formerly Harmonius "had always carefully suggested an objection to what was said and admitted nothing without investigation"; and to insure mutual benefit for their souls, he has chosen the profession of the Christian as the topic to be discussed in his letter. He regrets that such beneficial conversations are no longer possible, and then states in the form of a question the problem to be investigated: What is the profession of a Christian?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. Lieske, "Zur Theologie der Christusmystik Gregors von Nyssa," *Scholastik*, 14 (1939), 486 f.: "Für die Geschichte der Christlichen Mystik und Gnadentheologie ist es darum wertvoll zu sehen, wie nun Origenes' Logosmystik in der schöpferischen Begegnung mit Gregor von Nyssa, dem tiefsten Kenner originistischer Theologie, umgestaltet und weiter entfaltet wird . . . Es gibt wohl in der Literatur des kirchlichen Altertums keinen, der mit so zarter Christusliebe und so feinem Verständnis für religiöse Innerlichkeit vom Geheimnis gnadenhofter Einwohnung Gottes und dem trauten Verkehr Christi in unserer Seele spricht, wie Gregor von Nyssa."

<sup>21</sup> Throughout this study, references to the *De Professione* and the *De Perfectione* will be made to the columns in volume 46 of the Migne corpus. Whenever possible, I have tried to let Gregory speak for himself. To this end the translations are as literal as possible.

<sup>1</sup> 237A-240B. Gregory's introduction is typical of Byzantine epistolary style. Note the reference to the payment of his debt and the obligation of his promise, the apology for the length of the letter, and the mention of his effort to maintain a conversational tone. For the early Byzantine concept of the letter, cf. Sister M. Monica Wagner, "A Chapter in Byzantine Epistolography," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, IV (1948), 129-140.

Gregory begins his treatise by directing Harmonius' attention to the importance of understanding the name of Christian for those who aspire to the ascetical life. If the significance of the name of Christian was exactly understood, he writes, "we should receive much help in leading a life of perfection, provided we are truly eager to be through our sublime manner of life that which we are called."<sup>2</sup> Gregory's implication here is evident. For him, as for Basil, the ascetic (or monk) was before all else a Christian, and the ideal to which he should aspire was but the Christian ideal in all its perfection.<sup>3</sup> Christians should show the same concern for their profession, he maintains, as the physician, the rhetor, and the geometer do for theirs. Men who aspire to these professions see to it that their calling is not disgraced through ignorance, as it would be were they falsely to assume a title with which their profession did not accord, and Christians should be no less concerned to make good their title by their practice. The true aim of the Christian profession is to be ascertained by careful inquiry, and having ascertained it, "we shall not wish to be other than the name declares us to be, lest the story which the pagans tell about the ape be applied to us also."<sup>4</sup>

Here Gregory recounts the story of an ape whose owner, an Alexandrian juggler, had carefully trained it until it was able to perform with the skill of a professional dancer. When fitted out with a mask and a dancer's costume and exhibited with a chorus, it had caused a sensation by its rhythmic dancing, its true nature having been concealed all the while. One of the spectators, however, more astute than his fellows, acted upon his suspicions and threw almonds into the orchestra while all about were applauding and acclaiming the grace of the dancer. The animal's greed at once betrayed it. Rushing to seize the almonds, it quickly tore away the mask which covered its mouth, and the praise and admiration of the spectators was straightway changed to laughter.<sup>5</sup>

Gregory compares "those who have not formed their very nature by faith" to the ape, "since they are other than what they profess. They will be easily conquered by the dainties of the devil," who offers to the greedy, not dried figs or almonds, but his own evil provisions: vainglory, ambition, love of gain, love of pleasure, and other such things which "readily lead ape-like souls, fraudulently imitating the part of the Christian, into dishonor, for in time of trouble or misfortune they remove the mask of temperance or meekness or some other virtue." Fear of Christ's judgment should induce us "to

<sup>2</sup> 240B.

<sup>3</sup> See above, pp. 171 f.

<sup>4</sup> 240C.

<sup>5</sup> 240C-241A.

reflect upon the profession of the Christian, so that we may quickly become that which the name indicates, lest formed by a mere profession and by the pretext of the name alone, we be pointed out by Him ‘who sees in secret’ (Matt. 6.6) because we are other than we appear.”<sup>6</sup>

Gregory proposes that the meaning of Christianity be first considered etymologically; so he turns at once to the name Christ from which it is derived, leaving the discovery of “greater and nobler meanings corresponding to the sublimity of the name” to those who were more learned.<sup>7</sup> If the name Christ, he explains, “is changed to the clearer and more familiar word, it signifies king, since it is by this word that Holy Scripture designates the royal dignity.” This is the traditional explanation, for Gregory obviously has in mind the literal meaning of the name Christ, “the Anointed,” and is alluding to those scriptural passages which mention the anointing of kings. “Since, according to the Scripture, the Divinity is ineffable and incomprehensible,” he continues, “surpassing all power of thought, the prophets and apostles, divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, must lead us by the hand as it were, to the knowledge of the incorruptible nature by means of many names and concepts, for one concept befitting the Divinity sets us right regarding the other. Hence, by the word Kingdom, sovereign power is intimated.”<sup>8</sup>

“The knowledge of the incorruptible nature” was a theme which ever held a strong appeal for Gregory, as frequent passages in his writings testify.<sup>9</sup> The brief allusion to it here suggests that it had also been the theme of former conversations with Harmonius.

To designate the name of Christ by the names of virtues, Gregory believed, was to free it from “every passion and evil, since each virtue is perceived and designated in reference to the more excellent Being. Consequently the same [Being] is justice, wisdom, power, truth, goodness, life, salvation, incorruptibility, the unchanged and the unchangeable, and whatever sublime concept is revealed by such names. All are Christ and all are called Christ.” This name, with its connotation of kingship, seemed to

<sup>6</sup> 241A-B.

<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding his lack of formal training (*Ep. XIII*, PG 46, 1048-49), Gregory appears thoroughly conversant with the “learning” of his day. His interest in the origin and meaning of words is in accord with the tradition which then prevailed in the schools. In referring to “those who were more learned,” Gregory very likely has in mind Origen, who gives a detailed treatment in his *De Principiis*, PG 11, 130A-B, and Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (chapter 4), PG 19.

<sup>8</sup> 241D.

<sup>9</sup> The human knowledge of God was a theme which greatly intrigued Gregory, “and no phase of his philosophical activity interests us more because of its legacy to philosophy and mysticism.” Cf. J. Campbell, *The Greek Fathers* (New York, 1926), p. 62 f. In the above passage, as elsewhere, Gregory interprets “incorruptible” in its fullest sense as God Himself. Cf. *De Beatitudinibus*, PG 44, 1257A.

Gregory to reveal a more sublime concept in which are included all the other concepts designated by the various attributes; hence it is from it that he seeks the meaning of the name Christian. He writes:

If we who are united to Him by faith in Him are called by a name surpassing those which explain His incorruptible nature, all the concepts contemplated about His incorruptible nature by means of this name must in consequence be identical in us. For as we have obtained the name Christian by the participation of Christ, it is fitting that we be drawn as a consequence to a participation in all the sublime names.<sup>10</sup>

Gregory compares these various names which explain "His ineffable and manifold beatitude" to the links of a chain, all of which are joined together; the name Christ is the link at the end through which all the others are formed into a circle; to grasp one link is to draw all the others with it. If then anyone should "put on the name of Christ" but fail to manifest by his life the qualities which are contemplated together with that name, he falsifies it, and, like the Alexandrian juggler, disguises an ape as a human being by putting on a lifeless mask. "Christ cannot be other than justice, and purity, and truth, and estrangement from all evil, nor can there be a Christian who is truly a Christian if he does not reveal the participation of these names in himself."<sup>11</sup>

The meaning of Christianity, Gregory believed, should be explained by its definition. He defines it, as do most of the Greek Fathers, as "the imitation of the divine nature."<sup>12</sup> Before considering the definition, however, he anticipates Harmonius' objection that it is "too lofty for the lowliness of our nature," thereby touching upon one of the fundamental teachings of his theology of the spiritual life, namely, the doctrine of man as the image of God.<sup>13</sup> Here again Gregory's brevity justifies the assumption that Harmonius was familiar with his teaching. He writes:

Let no one misrepresent the definition as excessive and surpassing the lowliness of our nature, for it has not exceeded our nature. Should any one consider the first state of man, he will find from the lessons of the Scriptures that the definition does not exceed

<sup>10</sup> 241D-244A.

<sup>11</sup> 244B-C.

<sup>12</sup> 244C. This obligation is based on Matt. 5.48: "Be ye therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect," but from the close of the second century when Christian doctrine had come in contact with the philosophy of Plato, the Platonic principle that resemblance to God is the end of human activity gave added weight to this teaching. Cf. J. de Guibert, "Attributs Divins," *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, I, 1094.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory held that the perfections, natural and supernatural, with which God has endowed man's nature from the beginning constitute the image of God in man. This image, obscured by sin, can be cleansed and restored by the practice of virtue, and "in this restored image man can behold the perfections of God which are but imitations of the divine attributes." Cf. J. Muckle, "The Doctrine of St. Gregory of Nyssa on Man as the Image of God," *Medieval Studies*, 7 (1945), 55-84. Cf. also Daniélou (cited above, I note 18), pp. 52-58.

the limits of our nature, for the first condition of man was according to the imitation of the likeness of God. Moses explains this when he says, "God made man, according to the image of God He made him" (cf. Gen. 1.27). The profession of Christianity then is the restoration of man to his pristine good fortune. If from the beginning man was a likeness of God, perhaps we have not extended the definition beyond the mark in saying that Christianity is the imitation of the divine nature.<sup>14</sup>

To Harmonius, it may be assumed, the sense in which Gregory used the terms *όμοιότης* and *εἰκών* as applied to man was clear. In these two words Gregory sums up the uttermost possibilities of man's likeness to God, that is to say, not only the resemblance which the soul has of its very nature to God, but the whole supernatural life of which man is capable. It may also be assumed that Harmonius was equally aware of the precise implications of the word *φύσις*, since Gregory does not explain it. His meaning is apt to prove puzzling to those familiar with Western theology only, for he uses the term to comprise the intellectual life (*νοῦς*) and the supernatural life (*πνεῦμα*), to which is superadded the physical life (*ψυχή*).<sup>15</sup> Hence his insistence that the definition of Christianity as the imitation of the divine nature "does not exceed the limits of our nature."

Another term the peculiar significance of which was quite familiar to Harmonius is *μίμησις*. Gregory uses it in the Platonic sense of a copy or reproduction.<sup>16</sup> Thus, when insisting on the fitness of examining well whether or not there is danger of pretending to the Christian name when one's life is not in accord with one's profession, Gregory adduces Plato's example of the painter by way of illustration. If, when a painter has been commanded to make a portrait of the king for those of his subjects who live at a distance, the portrait should be hideous and not a true likeness, the king's authority would be injured thereby and his beauty outraged among his subjects who do not know him, for the original model would necessarily be supposed to be like the image. With the Christian the case is similar. If Christianity is defined as the imitation of God, should a person who has not yet accepted the word of the mystery see a life which we believe to be led according to the imitation of God, he will think that our God is also such. If therefore he sees examples of every good, he will believe that the God we worship is good. If, on the other hand, a person is passionate and bestial, transformed in character at times to other passions of wild beasts (for it is plain to see that wild beasts are formed from the perversions of our nature) then should

<sup>14</sup> 244C-D.

<sup>15</sup> Daniélou, (cited above, I note 18), p. 54. Cf. also H. von Balthasar, *Présence et Pensée* (Paris, 1942), 81-90, and F. Diekamp, *Die Gotteslehre des hl. Gregor von Nyssa* (Munich, 1896), p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, translated by G. Highet, II (New York, 1943), 233.

such a one call himself a Christian, since it is evident to all that the profession of the name proclaims an imitation of God, he would in his own life render the Divinity in which we believe blameworthy among the unbelieving. Wherefore the Scripture pronounces a more fearful threat against such as these, for it says: "Woe on account of those by whom my name is blasphemed among the gentiles"<sup>17</sup> (cf. Isa. 52.5).

Gregory held that "the Lord was leading us in a special manner to the understanding [of the Christian profession] when He said to those able to hear: 'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5.48), for He who named Him the Father of those who have believed, the true Father, wishes those begotten through Him to be like the perfection of the good perceived in him."<sup>18</sup>

Here again Gregory anticipates Harmonius' objection.

Therefore you will say to me [he writes], how can human lowliness attain to the beatitude perceived in God; the impossibility of it is at once evident. For how can an earthly creature become like to a heavenly one, when the very difference in their nature shows the impossibility of the imitation? It is equally impossible that the image be made commensurate with the heavenly magnitude and with the beauties therein, and that the earthly man be made like to the heavenly God.<sup>19</sup>

Gregory's explanation is clear. He shows "that the Gospel does not command human nature to be compared with the divine nature, but that we imitate God's actions as far as it is possible by our lives." And what are the actions which we perform that are similar to the actions of God? They are "to keep away from all evil, as far as possible; to be free from all defilement in deed, and word, and thought. This is the true imitation of the divine perfection, of the perfection of the heavenly God." But it is not in Heaven only that we are to be perfect, Gregory insists, for God is everywhere.<sup>20</sup>

It does not seem to me that the Gospel calls the element (i.e., the planet) of heaven a dwelling place of God set apart, as it were, in which it assigns us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. The Divinity is in all things equally, and in like manner pervades all creation . . . encompassing everything within its own being by its all-embracing power.<sup>21</sup>

Not content with an explanation based upon ontology alone, Gregory substantiates it by the Scriptures, pointing out that the Prophet also teaches

<sup>17</sup> 245A-B. Gregory frequently likens the passions to wild beasts. Such analogies are of very ancient origin, but it is likely that Gregory adopted his from Plato and Saint Paul. Daniélou, (cited above, I note 18), pp. 76-86, discusses these at length.

<sup>18</sup> 245C.

<sup>19</sup> 245C-D.

<sup>20</sup> 245D.

<sup>21</sup> 248A.

this when he says, "If I shall be in heaven by my thought, and if in my mind sinking down I scrutinize the regions under the earth, and if I extend my thoughts to the boundaries of creation, I see all things grasped by Thy right hand." <sup>22</sup> Here Gregory is evidently paraphrasing Psalm 138.8–10, for he then quotes the passage: "If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I descend into hell thou art present. If I take my wings early in the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there also shall thy hand lead me; and thy right hand shall hold me." <sup>23</sup>

It is known for certain, Gregory asserts, "that the heavenly inheritance is free from evils (as Holy Scripture in many places obscurely notes) but that in this most turbid life below, the evil passions are active." This he attributes to the power of the devil, whom he, in common with other Greek Fathers, considers the source of all evil.<sup>24</sup> The evil passions are active here below, he explains, "because the serpent, the inventor of evil, here crawls and creeps around the earthly life, as the Scripture says obscurely about him, that he walks on his breast and belly and always feeds upon the earth (cf. Gen. 3.14). This kind of motion and this kind of feeding teach us that this life is earthly and lived below; it admits the crawling of all kinds of evils and is the food of the serpent crawling on it. Therefore He who commands us to imitate the Heavenly Father, commands us to be purified from earthly passions. . ." <sup>25</sup>

Gregory maintains that the turning away from earthly passions is to be effected not by the changing of places, but by free will alone. "If therefore the separation from evil is of its nature directed by the impulse of the intention alone, nothing that the Gospel demands of us is burdensome, for there is no burden in directing the intention. We can arrive without trouble at whatever we wish by our thoughts." <sup>26</sup>

If here Gregory appears to overemphasize the part of the will and to ignore man's dependence on grace, it should be recalled that he was writing at a time when fatalism was a prevailing error.<sup>27</sup> It was necessary to emphasize man's role in effecting his spiritual perfection. That Gregory realized

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> 248B.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. Daniélou (cited above, I note 18), p. 97.

<sup>25</sup> 248C-D. On the doctrine of the devil's dominion over the world, cf. J. Rivière, *The Doctrine of the Atonement*, translated by L. Cappadetta (London, 1909), p. 248. This doctrine has remained a living force in ecclesiastical tradition. Cf. Stolz, (cited above, I note 19), p. 59.

<sup>26</sup> 248C.

<sup>27</sup> Fatalism was one of the most persistent survivals of paganism. It was manifested among the people in the practice of divination, the consultation of astrologers, and the use of amulets. Cf. Saint Basil, *In Psalmos* 45 (PG 29, 271C). Gregory's *Contra Fatum* (PG 45, 145–173) is directed chiefly against the practice of astrology, which he calls ὁ Ἐλληνισμός.

and taught the need of God's grace and the necessity of prayer on man's part to obtain it is evident in his other writings, particularly in the *De Virginitate* and the *De Oratione Dominica*.<sup>28</sup>

He who wishes it, Gregory explains, may easily have the heavenly life even here on earth; he has but to keep heavenly things in mind and to place the wealth of his virtue in the heavenly treasures, as the Gospel teaches when it says: "Lay not up to yourselves treasures on earth, but lay up to yourselves treasures in heaven; where neither the rust nor the moth doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal" (Matt. 6.19). These words show, according to Gregory, that no destructive power harmful to the beatitude of the life above is introduced there. Since he proceeds at once to enumerate some of the many ways in which the devil "exercises his subtle evil for the injury of human life," it is evident that by "destructive power" he means the devil.

Indeed he is produced in the thoughts like moths, which render whatever part they cling to useless, or he creeps along, impressing a trail of destruction on whatever he touches through his corrosive power, unless he is quickly shaken off. If the interior is safe, he plots against the exterior, for he digs through the treasure of the heart by pleasures, or he empties the receptacle of the soul of virtue, after he has stolen away the reason by anger or grief or some other passion.<sup>29</sup>

Since, therefore, the Lord says that there is neither moth nor rust in the treasure above, nor evil from the art of stealing, . . . we ought to transfer our trading place thither, where our treasures remain not only inviolate and undiminished, but are even increased many times like seeds. That the remuneration is magnified is entirely in accord with the nature of Him who receives our deposit, for just as we act according to our nature in offering the beggarly things that we are, so it is fitting that He who is rich in everything, which He possesses by His nature, should pay back in abundance what has been given over to Him.<sup>30</sup>

Let no one, then, be disheartened [Gregory urges], provided he pay to the heavenly treasure according to his ability, so as to receive according to the measure he has given. Let him wait according to the promise of Him who said that great things will be given in return for small, heavenly things in return for those of earth, everlasting for those that perish quickly. All, however, are such that they cannot be perceived by

<sup>28</sup> *De Virginitate*, PG 46, 320C, and *De Oratione Dominica*, PG 44, 1165. Gregory's teaching on grace, however, is found chiefly in the *De Hominis Opificio*, where he identifies it with man's original state of blessedness resulting from charity and the pure image of God possessed in wisdom and perfect liberty. Cf. F. Cayré, *Manual of Patrology and History of Theology*, translated by H. Howitt, I (Paris, 1936), 442. Concerning the difficulties of interpreting Gregory's teaching on this subject, cf. von Balthasar (cited above, note 15), p. 89, note 2. As has been pointed out, "This difficult and delicate question of the necessity of grace had not yet been raised in the East; no wonder, therefore, that we do not find in the Greek writers of the 4th century a definite and perfect solution." Cf. J. Tixeront, *History of Dogma*, translated from the Fifth French Edition by H.L.B., II (St. Louis, 1923), 144.

<sup>29</sup> 248D-249A. Cf. Luke 12.33.

<sup>30</sup> 249A-B.

the mind, for the inspired Scripture teaches that “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive what things are prepared for those who love Him” (I Cor. 2.9).<sup>31</sup>

Gregory closes his treatise on the same gracious note on which he began. He reminds Harmonius that he has not only made up for letters received, but has even provided for future deficits. It is his wish that Harmonius treat with him in the Lord in accordance with his thoughts, and that he be ever mindful of that which is pleasing to God and according to Gregory’s mind.<sup>32</sup>

### III. THE *DE PERFECTIONE*

The *De Perfectione* was written in response to the request of the monk Olympius for direction in attaining perfection “by means of the life according to virtue.” Gregory prefaces his treatise by politely commending Olympius’ zeal, which, he observes, befits his profession as a monk. He humbly regrets that he himself is unable to draw from his own life examples of conduct so as to provide the desired instruction by deeds instead of words, since direction in these matters would be worthy of confidence if one’s life were in accord with one’s words. It is his prayer, however, that he may some day point to his life instead of his discourse as an example, and so in order not to seem wholly useless and unprofitable to Olympius in the attainment of his aim, he has decided to offer counsel concerning “that which is necessary to tend towards the strict life.”<sup>1</sup>

The obligation of leading a perfect life, Gregory states, devolves from the name Christian; hence he first reminds Olympius of the dignity of the name and of the need of giving worthy thanks to God, who has bestowed this great gift. It is because

our good Lord Jesus Christ has freely bestowed on us the grace of participation in His adorable name that we are called by no other name. Whether one be rich and noble or low-born and poor, or even if distinguished because of certain advantages or honors, all such names are meaningless; the one appointed name given to those who believe in Him is Christian.

Since this grace has come to us from above [Gregory explains], it is first necessary to consider the magnitude of the gift in order to give worthy thanks to God who has bestowed such great gifts. Then we should reveal ourselves such by our life as the excellence of this name demands.

He believes that

the magnitude of the gift of which we have been deemed worthy in being named after the Lord of our life would become evident to us if we discovered the true meaning of

<sup>31</sup> 249B-C.

<sup>32</sup> 249D. Cf. I Cor. 3.9.

<sup>1</sup> 252A.

the name Christian, so that whenever we call upon the Lord of the universe, we may attend to the kind of notion we are forming in our souls or, when reverently pondering on it, what we believe He is called by this name. Once we understand this, by using this name as a teacher and guide towards a life of virtue, we shall readily learn also how we ought to proceed in our zeal for this life.<sup>2</sup>

With Saint Paul as their leader, Gregory maintains, they will have the safest guidance to the explanation of the two topics to be investigated. In his opinion, Saint Paul

showed most accurately of all what he knew Christ is and, by his own example, what one who has taken on himself the name (of Christian) ought to be, for he has imitated Him most exactly, exchanging the form of his soul for that of the Archetype, so as no longer to seem to be Paul who lived and spoke, but Christ Himself living in him (cf. Gal. 2.20), as he himself says when he rightly praised his own good deeds . . .<sup>3</sup>

The Pauline influence is evident in all of Gregory's work, but the present treatise is based entirely on the Apostle's teaching. Pauline expressions and metaphors abound; Gregory's thought is impregnated with the spirit of Saint Paul.

Gregory first enumerates the various names applied to Christ by Saint Paul which he intends to use as the framework of his treatise: Christ is the Power and the Wisdom of God, Peace, Light Inaccessible in which God dwells, Expiation and Redemption, High Priest, Pasch, Propitiation of Souls, Splendor of Glory and Figure of His Substance, Spiritual Food and Drink, Rock and Water, Foundation of Faith, Cornerstone, Image of the Invisible God, Great God, Head of the Body of the Church, First-born of the Dead, First-born among Many Brethren, Mediator between God and Man, Only-begotten Son Crowned with Honor and Glory, Lord of Glory, Beginning of Things, King of Justice, King of Peace, King of All Things, Having the Rule of an Unlimited Kingdom. Gregory explains that "by these and many other such names, the number of which is not easily reckoned," Saint Paul revealed the significance of the name Christian. All of them collectively, since an index of the name's significance "is gathered from the understanding of each one of the titles, afford us some idea of the meaning of the name Christian in so far as we are capable of understanding those things which indicate its ineffable majesty."<sup>4</sup>

Before examining the various names used by Saint Paul in reference to Christ, Gregory in a passage reminiscent of the *De Professione Christiana*, dwells first on the word "Christ" itself.<sup>5</sup> With its etymology and its peculiar

<sup>2</sup> 252B-253A.

<sup>3</sup> 253A-B.

<sup>4</sup> 253C-D.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. above, p. 177.

association with kings in mind, he points out that the name Christ in its proper sense signifies kingly power, the honor of which surpasses all dignity, power, and sovereignty, in that the power of the king comprehends all other power. "Therefore, since the Good Master has honored us by a participation in the greatest and most divine of names whereby we are called Christians, in order not to belie our name, we should manifest in our lives all the names which interpret the name of Christ."<sup>6</sup>

In writing to Harmonius, Gregory had emphasized the thought that the Christian's life is a profession and that it has its peculiar obligations as do the other professions. With Olympius, however, his approach to the problem of Christian living is metaphysical. "It is fitting, therefore, that those who call themselves Christians should first be what the name professes and then adapt the name to themselves." Not its name but its underlying nature determines what an object really is, he explains, and this is made known by a suitable name. Because a rock or a tree is called a man, they are not on that account men. There must first be a man, then he is called by the name proper to his nature. Not even when there is some similarity in objects is the same name suitable; one does not call a statue a man, nor the representation of a horse a horse; the nature of the object will indicate its proper name. Images made in wood, bronze, or stone are named from the material.<sup>7</sup>

A man and a statue are distinguished, Gregory explains further, by the respective properties of each — one is a rational, intellectual living being, the other, lifeless material molded by imitation into a form. In like manner, the true Christian is distinguished from the one who only seems to be such by virtue of the peculiar qualities which are visible in his characteristics.

The distinctive marks of the true Christian are all those we perceive in Christ. We imitate as many of them as we are able; those which nature does not succeed in imitating we worship and adore. Hence all the names interpreting the name of Christ ought to shine forth in the Christian life, some by imitation, others by worship, if the man of God intends to be perfect, as the Apostle says (cf. II Tim. 3.17), in no way mutilating perfection by evil.<sup>8</sup>

In the mythical monsters of Greek literature and art — horses with the heads of bulls, centaurs, and serpent-footed creatures — Gregory finds types of those Christians who, making monsters of themselves by unbelief, anger, and lust, fail to manifest Christian principles in their lives. Thus, he explains, one who has the head of a brute, "that is, one who does not believe in the

<sup>6</sup> 253D–256A.

<sup>7</sup> 256A–B. Cf. Aristotle *Topica* VII 3, 153A, though it is very likely that Gregory is here merely applying one of the philosophical commonplaces of the time. On Gregory's learning, cf. above, I note 7.

<sup>8</sup> 256B–C.

Head of All, who is the Word," would not rightfully be called a Christian although he be perfect in other respects. Nor would one rightfully be called a Christian who, though having the proper head (because he is a believer), reveals by his conduct a body which does not correspond to the head. Such is he who is imbued with the angry passions of serpents, becoming enraged like snakes, or he who becomes a kind of centaur by his lust, which is like that of the frenzied horse. Many persons of both classes are to be seen, according to Gregory. Adherents of idolatry who lead honorable lives he compares to creatures with the heads of bulls, like the Minotaur, while Christians who belie their name by their bestial lives he compares to centaurs or serpent-footed creatures. Only their countenance is Christian.<sup>9</sup>

With the mythical monsters still in mind, Gregory insists that the Christian should be recognized by his homogeneous body. The believer is "to manifest by his life the marks of all the good conceived according to Christ."<sup>10</sup> With an abrupt change to one of Saint Paul's metaphors, he repeats this idea. "To be in some respects what the name professes, but in others to be always shifting to the contrary is nothing else than to be divided against oneself within the enemy's line, being in a state of discord within because of virtue and vice, admitting of no truce with self and coming to no terms with life."<sup>11</sup>

Enlarging upon Saint Paul's query, "For what fellowship hath light with darkness?" (II Cor. 6.14) Gregory further stresses this same thought. Since darkness is irreconcilable and incompatible with light, he who clings to both is of necessity torn asunder by the contradiction, for faith gives forth light, but a dark life darkens the brightness of reason. Such a one becomes his own enemy and is divided into two factions, virtue and vice, and is drawn up against himself in battle array.

And just as it is impossible for each of two enemies to be victorious over the other, since the victory of one works the death of the foe, so in this intestine conflict arising from the confused life, the stronger army cannot possibly conquer if the other army has not been entirely destroyed, for how can the army of piety be superior to the army of evil as long as the phalanx of wickedness is resisting?

The triumph of virtue will be brought about, Gregory maintains, when, by its alliance with reason, it causes evil to be annihilated.

Then will be fulfilled the word of God spoken by the prophet, "I shall kill and I shall make live" (Deut. 32.39), for it is not otherwise possible for the good to live in me unless it is quickened by the death of the enemy. As long as we cling to both, grasping

<sup>9</sup> 256D-257A. The transformations which Gregory depicts here are those effected by three of the common serious sins. On Gregory's use of animal symbolism, cf. Daniélou (cited above, I note 18), pp. 76-86.

<sup>10</sup> 257A-B.

<sup>11</sup> 257B-C.

opposites with each hand, it is impossible to possess both, for when we grasp evil with one hand, virtue slips from our hold.<sup>12</sup>

At this point Gregory resumes the thread of his discourse. "There is," he writes by way of recapitulation, "one way toward the pure and divine life for those who love virtue, namely, to know the significance of the other names [applied to Christ], to which they must be conformed." The various expressions listed at the beginning of the treatise, which were used by Saint Paul to interpret Christ, will serve as a very safe guide for the life of virtue if they are set forth with fitting zeal. Some, as explained before, are to be imitated, others to be worshiped and reverenced.<sup>13</sup>

Although Gregory states his intention of considering the titles in the order in which he has listed them, he nowhere indicates the significance of the order. Apparently there was none, for except that there may be a certain fitness in beginning with Christ's revelation of Himself through creation, and in concluding with a consideration of Christ's universal sovereignty, here, as in other of his writings, Gregory seems not to have been concerned about a systematic presentation of his doctrine. What is evident in the list of the titles, however, is the fact that the greater number of them have to do with the divinity of Christ. For Gregory, as for all the Fathers of the Church, dogma is the basis of the Christian life and, as we would expect of a champion of Christ's divinity in the fourth century, his spiritual doctrine centers about the great truths concerning the Incarnate Son of God.

#### CHRIST IS THE POWER AND THE WISDOM OF GOD

For Saint Gregory of Nyssa as for Saint Paul, creation is a manifestation of the divinity of Christ, who in His preexistence shared in the creative activity. From a consideration of Christ as the Power and the Wisdom of God (I Cor. 1.24), Gregory explains, we gain concepts of Christ which befit His divinity by reason of which we ought to reverence His name. "Since all creation, that which we perceive by the senses and that lying beyond the perception of the senses, came into existence by Him and is sustained in Him, Wisdom is necessarily associated with Power in determining the presence of Christ who created all things."

Had Wisdom not designed their origin and Power not accompanied Wisdom to the perfection of what had been designed, the great and inexplicable wonders of creation would not have come into existence. Hence,

<sup>12</sup> 257D-260A. Gregory is not following the Aristotelian definition in referring to the alliance of virtue and reason. For him virtues are not acts performed according to right reason, but imitations of the divine attributes implanted in man's rational nature whereby he is the image of God. Cf. Muckle (cited above, II note 13), p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> 260A.

whenever we gaze on the greatness of creation, we shall recognize Christ's untold power, "and whenever we consider how these things which had no existence came into being, the multiform nature in them having been called into existence by the Divine Will, we then believe that Christ is Incomprehensible Wisdom." Furthermore, according to Gregory, the contact thus effected with Christ can be a creative one; through prayer and contemplation we become partakers of Christ's power and wisdom.

He who calls upon Him in prayer and through prayer draws near Him upon whom the eye of his soul gazes is thus also strengthened by Power 'unto the inward man,' as the Apostle says, who looked upon the Power, for Christ is the Power. And he who calls upon Wisdom, which again is known to be the Lord, becomes wise, as the Proverb says. Accordingly, he who is named after Christ, who is Power and Wisdom, is also named after Power, for he has been empowered against sin; and he will reveal Wisdom in himself by the choice of the better thing. By choosing the beautiful, on the one hand, and grasping the concept of power on the other, we manifest wisdom and power in ourselves, and the perfection of life, since it is entwined in both, is achieved.<sup>14</sup>

#### CHRIST IS PEACE

In explaining Christ as Peace, Gregory draws upon the most fundamental principles of asceticism. "We shall truly show forth the name of Christ," he declares, "if we reveal Christ in our life, by peace among ourselves. He has slain enmity (Eph. 2.14), as the Apostle says. Let us, therefore, not suffer it to revive in us, but let us openly declare it dead in our life." Let us never arouse what has been nobly slain by God for our salvation, "through anger and the recollection of injuries, effecting thereby an evil resurrection of what has been well put to death."

The Christian life is an endeavor to become like Christ. "If we have Christ, who is Peace, let us also put to death enmity in ourselves so that we may manifest in our own life that which we believe was in Him. For He, 'breaking down the middle wall of the partition, established the two in Himself, making peace in one new man.' (*Ibid.*) But it was not merely an exterior peace on which Gregory insisted. We are "to reconcile not only those who fight without, but those who arouse seditions within, so that the flesh may no longer 'lust against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh' (Gal. 5.17), but the prudence of the flesh being subjected to the divine law, we may be at peace within ourselves, having been transformed into one common peaceable man." According to Gregory peace is "the harmony of dissident things," and he reminds Olympius that "whenever the internal war

<sup>14</sup> 260B-D. On Saint Paul's doctrine of the preëxistent Christ and His participation in creation, cf. F. Prat, *The Theology of Saint Paul*, translated from the Tenth French Edition by J. Stoddard (2 vols., Westminster, no date), II, 111-116.

of our nature is destroyed, by cultivating peace in ourselves we both become peace and also manifest the lordly name of Christ.”<sup>15</sup>

#### CHRIST AS TRUE LIGHT AND INACCESSIBLE TO FALSEHOOD

“When we consider that Christ is True Light and inaccessible to falsehood” (John 1.9), Gregory explains,

we learn that our life also must be illuminated by the rays of the true Father. The virtues are the rays of the Sun of Justice emanating to enlighten us. By their means the works of darkness are destroyed in us so that walking honestly in the day (Rom. 13.12,13) and repudiating the hidden things of shame, we may do all things in the light and become the light itself so as to shine forth to others through our works, as is proper to light. And if we consider Christ as holiness (I Cor. 1.30), abstaining both in thoughts and deeds from all that is evil and impure, we shall become participators in the power of His holiness, not by our words, but by our life.<sup>16</sup>

It is here evident that the word *virtue*, as Gregory uses it, has a richer significance than Western theology accords it. In its positive aspect (in theological terminology, the passive aspect) it is enlightenment or illumination by God and a communication of His own holiness. In its negative aspect (theologically, the active) it is the destruction of sin — “the works of darkness.”<sup>17</sup>

#### CHRIST AS REDEMPTION

It is from Christ’s title of Redemption (I Tim. 2.6) that Gregory derives our obligation “to follow the Lord so as to live no longer for ourselves,” but for Him. “Comprehending that Christ is Redemption, giving Himself as ransom for us, we are taught to understand that by offering Himself as the price of each of our souls and by granting us immortality, Christ made us whom He bought from death to life His own possession” (cf. I Cor. 6.20).

We have become the slaves of the Lord who has ransomed us, and we should, therefore, follow Him entirely “so as no longer to live to ourselves but to Him who has acquired us through the exchange of His own life. For we are no longer masters of ourselves, but He who purchased us is Lord and we are in His possession. The will of Him who is Lord over us will, therefore, be the law of our life.” When death had power over us, the law of sin without us governed us, but “having become the property of Life, we must adopt the will of Him who has power over us, lest we depart from the will of Life, turning back again through sin to death, the evil master of our souls.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> 260D–261B.

<sup>16</sup> 261B–C.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Daniélou (cited above, I note 18), p. 105.

<sup>18</sup> 261C–264A.

Although Gregory here enlarges upon his concept of Christ's ransom of us, it is interesting to note that he in no way refers to the theory of the devil's rights, which in his *Oratio Catechetica Magna* he elaborates with such precision.<sup>19</sup> In the present treatise, it is from death, not from the devil, that Christ is emphasized as redeeming us, for death — and here Gregory obviously has the teaching of Genesis<sup>20</sup> in mind — is the natural consequence of sin.

#### CHRIST AS OUR PASCH AND OUR HIGH PRIEST

A further reason for assigning us to Christ as His own possession, Gregory holds, is the fact that Saint Paul calls Christ our Pasch (I Cor. 5.7) and our High Priest (Heb. 6.20). Christ was truly sacrificed as our Pasch and was Himself the priest offering the sacrifice to God, as the Apostle testifies when he says, "He offered Himself as an oblation and a sacrifice for us" (cf. Eph. 5.2). The lesson we are to learn here is that he who looks on Christ, who thus offered Himself, "will offer himself also as a living sacrifice to God, 'holy and pleasing, becoming a reasonable service'" (cf. Rom. 12.1). The Christian must share in the redemptive work of Christ. His sacrifice will consist in not being "conformed to this world," but in being transformed "to the renewal of his mind in order to prove what is the good and the acceptable and the perfect will of God" (cf. Rom. 12.2).<sup>21</sup>

It is by mortification, Gregory declares, that we manifest the good will of God. The life of the flesh must be sacrificed according to the law of the spirit, "for the prudence of the flesh is hostile to God and is not subjected to the law of God (cf. Rom. 8.6). As long as the flesh lives, "the acceptable and perfect will of God" (cf. Rom. 12.2) cannot be observed without hindrance unless it be offered through a life-giving sacrifice," that is, by mortifying the members which are on this earth and which render the passions active (cf. Col. 3.5).<sup>22</sup>

#### CHRIST AS PROPITIATION

The necessity for mortification is learned also from the consideration of Christ as a Propitiation (cf. Rom. 3.25) in His own Blood. With Saint Paul, Gregory holds that Christian mortification is in the case of each individual the continuous carrying into effect of Christ's death. "Each one should be-

<sup>19</sup> PG 44, 60–66. On Saint Gregory and the theory of the devil's rights, cf. Rivière (cited above, II note 25), II, 124–127.

<sup>20</sup> Gen. 3.19.

<sup>21</sup> 264A–B.

<sup>22</sup> 264B–C.

come a propitiation for himself, purifying the soul through the mortification of the members.”<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that in propounding his ascetical teaching derived from the doctrine of the Redemption, it is the realistic theory of this doctrine that Gregory stresses. He emphasizes such concepts as *substitution* (Christ is our Ransom, a victim for us), *sacrifice* (Christ is our Sacrifice and the Sacrificing Priest), and *expiation* (Christ is a propitiation in His own blood). This is in marked contrast with his treatment of the same doctrine in *Oratio Catechetica Magna*, where it is the physical theory that he sets forth together with the theory of the devil’s rights.<sup>24</sup>

#### CHRIST AS THE BRIGHTNESS OF HIS GLORY AND THE IMPRINT OF HIS SUBSTANCE

“Whenever Christ is spoken of as ‘the Brightness of His Glory’ and ‘the Imprint of His Substance’ (Heb. 1.3), Gregory asserts, “through these words we conceive ideas of His adorable majesty.” Before commenting on these names, however, he first emphasizes the divine source of Saint Paul’s teaching and the ineffable nature of the revelation granted him.

For Paul, truly inspired by the Divine Spirit and taught by God, having searched closely in the depths of the wisdom and the knowledge of God (cf. II Cor. 12.4), gave a glimpse of those things he had learned when he was divinely enlightened through the perception of unsearchable and unutterable things, by means of certain obscure sayings, since his tongue was too feeble for his thoughts. The hearing of those things he received made room for his comprehension of the mystery, and he uttered as much as speech had power to serve his thought.<sup>25</sup>

Gregory’s emphasis on the part which hearing played in Saint Paul’s experience is evident. It was “the hearing of those things he received” which “made room for” the Apostle’s “comprehension of the mystery.” He likewise notes that Saint Paul’s role had not been entirely passive throughout; he had “searched closely in the depths of the wisdom and the knowledge of God.”<sup>26</sup>

It is, however, the incomprehensibility of God with which Gregory is here chiefly concerned, although he touches upon it but briefly. Saint Paul, he reminds Olympius, having learned everything which human power makes accessible, “shows that the explanation of the supreme essence is out

<sup>23</sup> 264C.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Tixeront (cited above, II note 28), II, 148–151, and Rivière (cited above, II note 25), I, 179–188.

<sup>25</sup> 264C-D.

<sup>26</sup> Seeing among the Greeks was the essential thing (although Aristotle declared the ear to be the spiritual sense organ, cf. Jaeger (cited above, II note 16, II, 228), whereas in Old Testament Jewish piety and in Christian revelation hearing is preferred to seeing. Cf. Stolz (cited above, I note 19), p. 184.

of reach and beyond the comprehension of human thought.” Even the attributes of God, which the Apostle had contemplated — “peace and power and life and justice and light and truth” — do not render Him comprehensible, for “no man has ever seen nor can ever see God.” (Cf. I Tim. 6.16.)<sup>27</sup>

At this point Gregory reverts to the title. Saint Paul, he explains, finding “no name to express the meaning of the incomprehensible, called that which surpasses all good, that which cannot be perceived nor fittingly expressed, glory and substance, while the most excellent substance of all beings he leaves without name.” In calling Christ “the Brightness of His Glory” and “the Imprint of His Substance,” the Apostle is interpreting the unbroken union of the Son with the Father and the Father’s endless contemplation of the Son. The term “brightness” (*ἀπαύγασμα*) signifies the union, the term “imprint” (*χαρακτήρ*) their equality.<sup>28</sup>

Gregory, it appears, cannot sufficiently emphasize the Apostle’s teaching on the divine equality of the Word.

He who has thought the nature resplendent also knew well the splendor of the substance, and he who conceived in his mind the magnitude of the substance, measured the substance entirely by the figure which was apparent. Wherefore he also calls the Lord the Form of God, not lessening the Lord by the notion of form, but through the form pointing out the greatness of the Son. By this the grandeur of the Father is understood, which does not exceed its own form in any way, nor is it found outside the figure around it. For there is nothing about the Father which is not well formed and beautiful, nothing which the beauty of the Only-begotten Son does not proclaim. Wherefore the Lord says, “He who sees Me, sees the Father also,” (John 14.9) signifying thereby that there is neither defect nor excess.<sup>29</sup>

Saint Paul solves the difficulties of those who search with unbridled curiosity into matters beyond their comprehension, Gregory affirms, when he states that the Son “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1.3). Seeking to discover the relationship of the spiritual and the material (Gregory evidently has the Apollinarians in mind here),<sup>30</sup> they had asked how quality, form, color, and limit could be ascribed to that which has no quality, which is formless, colorless, and limitless. “For he solves all these and similar questions of inquirers when he says that the Word supports all things by the word of His power, bringing them from nothingness into ex-

<sup>27</sup> 264D.

<sup>28</sup> 264A. On Saint Paul’s use of this title, cf. Prat (cited above, III note 14), I, 369–371.

<sup>29</sup> 265B.

<sup>30</sup> Followers of Apollinarius, who in defending Christ’s divine personality taught that His humanity was incomplete, consisting of a body and a sensitive soul only, the Word taking the place of the spiritual soul. Cf. Tixeront (cited above, II note 28), II, 94–111. Gregory’s *Antirrheticus contra Apollinarem* is the most important of the ancient works against this heresy.

istence. Everything which has received a spiritual nature has one cause of its substance — the word of His inexpressible power.<sup>31</sup>

It is on this ontological basis that Gregory urges the efficacy of the practice of the presence of God.

From these things we are taught to look upon Him from whom all beings have their source, for if thence we came into being and we exist in Him, there is every necessity for believing that there is nothing beyond the knowledge of Him in whom we are, and by whom we have come into existence, and to whom we return. By this thought, as is right, innocence of life is preserved, for who, believing that he exists by, through, and in Him, wishes to have Him whom each one knows is encompassing him, as a witness of a base and wicked life?<sup>32</sup>

It is clear that Gregory here has in mind not a mere thinking about Christ's presence, but a realization of that presence in its ontological sense.

#### CHRIST AS SPIRITUAL FOOD AND DRINK

In taking up this title, Gregory's attention, it will be noted, still centers on the relation of the sensible and the spiritual. Saint Paul reminds us, he states, that human nature is not simple, but a composite of the spiritual and the sensible, for each of which there is a proper food. "The body is nourished by food perceptible to the senses; spiritual food preserves the health of the soul." Nourishment for the soul, like that of the body, Saint Paul teaches, consists of food and drink. "For to the weak and afflicted it becomes bread, strengthening the heart of man. To those wearied because of the misery of this life, and on this account thirsty, it is wine, making the heart joyful" (cf. Ps. 103.15). As a justification for this allegorical interpretation, Gregory notes "the obscure saying of the prophet, who by a place of pasture and water of refreshment signifies in this manner of speech the comfort offered to those who are wearied" (Ps. 22.2). "But," Gregory adds, "if any one discerning the mystery should say that the Lord is called food and drink, this interpretation is in accordance with the proper meaning, for His flesh is food indeed and His blood is drink indeed" (cf. John 6.56).<sup>33</sup>

It is evident that the two spiritual foods — the bread of the Scriptures and the bread of the Eucharist — are in Gregory's mind inseparable. It is also interesting to note that in giving his interpretations he follows the traditional order observed in the Liturgy, for in the Mass the reading of holy Scripture (the Epistle and Gospel) precedes the Offertory, Consecration, and Communion. Gregory is careful, however, to emphasize the distinction

<sup>31</sup> 265C.

<sup>32</sup> 265D.

<sup>33</sup> 265D-268B.

to be noted in the two interpretations he has given. According to the first, he explains, "there is for all an abundant participation in the Word who becomes, when He is received by those seeking Him, food and drink offered without discrimination." According to the second, however, "there is a participation of the same food and drink, but not without approval and discrimination, since the Apostle has defined it thus beforehand: 'Let each one prove himself, and thus eat of the bread and drink of the chalice. For he who eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks judgment to himself'" (I Cor. 11.28).<sup>34</sup>

Gregory finds confirmation of these words of Saint Paul in the gospel account of Christ's burial, which he characteristically interprets in an allegorical sense.

The Evangelist seems to me to have very securely sealed the same meaning when in the time of the mystic passion that noble senator, wrapping the body of the Lord in an immaculately clean linen cloth, placed it in a new and pure sepulchre (cf. Luke 23.53). Wherefore the precept of the Apostle and the observance of the Gospel become the law for all of us to receive the holy Body with a pure conscience. If there be any stain of sin, we should wash it with the water of our tears.

Gregory evidently judged that the sins of one striving for perfection were of such a nature that tears could remove their stains. For grievous sins, however, or at least for those comparatively grievous, Gregory held that there was an obligation to declare them.<sup>35</sup>

#### CHRIST AS THE ROCK

With this title Gregory proposes to Olympius the contemplation of the immutability of Christ as a means of attaining stability in the spiritual life. Saint Paul makes Christ the mystical Rock from which the thirst of the Israelites was quenched (cf. I Cor. 10.4).<sup>36</sup> Gregory, however, states that

Christ, who is called the Rock, helps us through this name to be firm and stable in the life according to excellence, and constant in the endurance of suffering, thereby showing our souls strong and invincible against every attack of sin. For these and other reasons of this kind we shall also be a rock, imitating in our fragile nature, as far as possible, the unalterable and immutable nature of the Lord.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> 268C.

<sup>35</sup> 268C-D. Gregory endeavors to classify these sins in *Ep. Canonica*, PG 45, 221; 233. Cf. Tixeront (cited above, II note 28), p. 184. It is very likely that the expression of sorrow for sins which Gregory recommends to Olympius is similar to that expressed in the Liturgy — in the West by the *Confiteor*; in the East by the *Εὐχὴ πιστῶν*.

<sup>36</sup> I Cor. 10.4. Saint Paul is here referring to the preëxistent Christ. Cf. Prat (cited above, III note 14), II, 118.

<sup>37</sup> 268D-269A.

## CHRIST AS THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH AND THE CORNER-STONE

In calling Christ “the Foundation of faith” and “the Corner-stone” (cf. Eph. 2.20), Saint Paul “the wise architect” (cf. I Cor. 3.10) points out for us “a useful aid for the life of perfection,” Gregory maintains.

We learn from these titles that the beginning and the end of all

good conduct, all good learning, and every good pursuit is the Lord. For He is the hope (which we think of as the Head, toward which all earnest striving after virtue tends), having been called thus by Paul (cf. I Tim. 1.1). The beginning of this lofty building of life is faith in Him (cf. Gal. 3.5), since on it as a foundation we are erecting the beginnings of life, and by our daily upright actions we are establishing by law pure thoughts and actions. Thus the Head of All becomes our Head also, and by the two walls of our life, that of the body and that of the soul, which have been constructed by means of upright conduct and purity, it accommodates itself by a natural joining without an angle.<sup>38</sup>

Developing Saint Paul’s architectural metaphor further, Gregory continues in homely fashion:

If the other parts of the buildings should be lacking, either because the external decorum is not in keeping with the purity of soul, or because the interior virtue is not in keeping with the external appearance, Christ, who fits Himself to a double and diagonal building alone, would not be the Head of this half-completed life, for there cannot be a cornerstone unless the two walls come together. Therefore, the beauty of the Cornerstone will be placed in our dwelling when from both sides the twofold life, upright and constant, with nothing crooked or out of line, harmoniously extends the straight canon of life to the measuring string of the virtues.<sup>39</sup>

## CHRIST AS THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD

With this title Gregory sets forth for Olympius the fundamental doctrine of his theology of the spiritual life. Christ is the image and exemplar of the invisible God who became man to restore in us the image of God and to refashion us to the beauty of that image with which man had in the beginning been endowed.

When St. Paul calls Christ “the Image of the invisible God” (Col. 1.15) and “in all things God” and “great God,” for with these words he proclaims the greatness of the true Lord, he teaches us that He always is who is . . . Therefore, He who surpasses all knowledge and comprehension, who is inexpressible and ineffable, became the image of the invisible God because of His love for mankind, in order to make you again the image of God. By His own change which He assumed, there was a change effected in you so that you also might be refashioned through Him to the beauty of the Archetype into the character which was from the beginning.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup> 269A-B.

<sup>39</sup> 269B-C.

<sup>40</sup> 269C-D.

By molding our lives on the pattern proposed to us, we are to become the image of the Image.

Wherefore, if we also are to become the image of the Image of the invisible God, it is fitting that the form of our life be molded to the pattern of life presented to us. But what is this? That though living in the flesh, we live not “according to the flesh” (cf. Rom. 8.12), for the image of the Archetype of the invisible God, who came among us through the Virgin, was found in all things in the likeness of human nature, save that He alone experienced no sin, “who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth” (I Peter 2.22).<sup>41</sup>

Here Gregory again introduces Plato’s metaphor of the painter to clarify his teaching. A master artist in teaching us to paint would present to us a beautiful model which we would strive to imitate exactly in our painting. Now each of us is the painter of his own life; the will is the craftsman of the work, and the virtues are the colors used. Lest our imitation of the model be base and ugly, a figure of evil rather than the image of the Master, we should take care to use only pure colors skilfully compounded of the virtues “so that we may become the Image by true imitation of the beauty of the Archetype, as Paul did, who by his virtuous life became an imitator of Christ.”<sup>42</sup>

Upon analysis it will be seen, Gregory affirms, that humility and patience, virtues which were most conspicuous in His Passion, are the dominant colors to be used in our copy of the Image.

For He said, “Learn of Me that I am meek and humble of heart” (Matt. 11.29) . . . and in how many ways He manifested patience! Swords and clubs and chains and stripes, His cheeks struck with blows, His face covered with spittle, His shoulders submitted to stripes, an impious judgment, a cruel sentence, the soldiers harsh with their sullen denial, with mockeries and insults and blows of the reed, nails, gall and vinegar, all the most grievous things which He endured without cause, nay rather, in return for innumerable benefits. His requital for those who treated Him thus was, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23.34).

He who could have hurled the sky on them from above, or wiped out those insolent ones by earthquake, tidal wave, torrents of rain, or fire like that of Sodom, “endured these things in meekness and patience.” He “by His life gave to yours the laws of long-suffering.”<sup>43</sup>

Here again Gregory points out to Olympius, without in any way minimizing the necessity of individual effort to acquire virtue and root out vice, the transforming power of contemplation. Not only meekness and patience, but all the virtues are manifest in Christ, who is the Archetype of God.

<sup>41</sup> 269D–272A.

<sup>42</sup> 272A–B.

<sup>43</sup> 272B–D.

Therefore he who gazes upon the Image adorns his own form and also becomes through patience an image of the invisible God.<sup>44</sup>

**CHRIST AS THE HEAD OF THE BODY OF THE CHURCH**

With this title Gregory first reminds Olympius that the relation of the Christian to Christ is that of a member of the body to the head, and that for the members, life, union, cohesion, and growth all derive from the head.

He who understands that Christ is the Head of the Church (cf. Eph. 5.23) should consider this above all, that the Head is of the same nature and substance as the body to which it belongs, and each of the members shares the same nature. Accordingly, if there is any member apart from the body, it is also entirely separated from the head. Reason teaches us by this that whatever the head is by nature, each of the members should be that also, so as to become conformable to the nature of the head. But we are the members who are joined to the Body of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Evil passions are swords by means of which the members are severed from the Head; other instruments of evil sever the members from the body, and thus they also are separated from the Head. "In order, therefore, that the whole body remain in accordance with its nature, it is fitting that each of the members be in union with the Head in such a way as by reason of its nature to complete the pure Head."<sup>46</sup>

The virtues of the Head, Gregory insists, should be those of the members also.

If we consider the Head incorruptible, the members ought to be entirely united in incorruptibility. Thus it follows that the other notions ascribed to the Head: peace, holiness, truth, and all such virtues, should be observed in the members. For through the Son these and similar virtues are revealed in the members when they testify that they belong by nature to the Head. Thus the Apostle says that He (Christ) is the Head "from whom the whole body, being compacted and fitly joined together at every joint, makes an increase of the body according to the operation in the measure of each member" (cf. Eph. 4.16).<sup>47</sup>

From Christ's title as Head Gregory draws another lesson. In living creatures, he reminds Olympius, sight and hearing, the senses which control the motion of the feet and the operation of the hands, are located in the head. "It is necessary then, in accordance with the true Head, that we move the body by every impulse and energy, wherever He has fixed His eye or placed His ear. When, therefore, the Head gazes at the things which are

<sup>44</sup> 272D.

<sup>45</sup> 273A.

<sup>46</sup> 273A-B.

<sup>47</sup> 273B-C.

above, the members also, joined to the Head, must follow His leadership and tend toward the things above.”<sup>48</sup>

**CHRIST AS FIRST-BORN OF CREATION, FIRST-BORN FROM THE DEAD,  
AND FIRST-BORN AMONG MANY BRETHREN**

Before considering the ascetical teaching implicit in the three titles designating the primogeniture of Christ, which he proposes to Olympius as a kind of unit, Gregory refutes the heretical opinions which had centered about them, “so as to have no adversary in their evil teachings.” Even when merely stating the heretical position, he manages to incorporate one of those impressive texts in which Saint Paul sums up the various aspects of Christ’s primacy.

Those fighting against God say that the Only-begotten God, the Maker of all things, “of whom and by whom and in whom are all things” (cf. Rom. 11.36), is called the First-born of all creation (cf. Col. 1.15) because He is a work, a creation, something made by God; or they declare that He is the Brother of creation, being first by the prerogative of time, as Reuben preceded his brothers, but not by nature.<sup>49</sup>

Gregory points out the inconsistency of those who hold such a belief. For them, he maintains, Christ cannot be both the Only-begotten and the First-born. The Only-begotten has no brothers, but without brothers He cannot be the First-born. He then goes on to explain that the Scripture applies the title “Only-begotten God” “to the Word before all ages, but the First-born of all creation made in Christ is the Word made flesh.” Gregory’s interpretation of this second title, which is not that suggested by the context in Saint Paul, was doubtless prompted by his fear of Arianism.<sup>50</sup>

From the other titles of primogeniture: First-born from the dead (Col. 1.18) and First-born among many brethren (Rom. 8.20), Gregory believes that “we shall accordingly perceive that He is at the same time the First-born of creation. He is therefore the First-born from the dead, having become the first of those who sleep so that he might open the way to the resurrection for all flesh.”

“The way to the resurrection for all flesh,” Gregory explains, is baptism, for by baptism we are not only regenerated, but we become the brothers of Christ. In His baptism in the Jordan, Christ led the way for us whom He

<sup>48</sup> 273C-D. There are many passages throughout Gregory’s writings which refer to the doctrine of the Mystical Body. A number of them are assembled in E. Mersch’s *The Whole Christ*, translated from the 2nd French edition by J. Kelly (Milwaukee, 1938), pp. 314–322. The passages in the *De Perfectione*, however, are not included. (Unfortunately, Père Lubac’s work, *Corpus Mysticum*, was not available to me.)

<sup>49</sup> 273D–276A.

<sup>50</sup> 276B. Saint Paul applies this title to the preëxistent Christ. Cf. Prat (cited above, III note 14), I, 289 f.

was going to make “sons of day and sons of light through a heavenly generation by water and the Spirit.” “Christ is the First-offering of our nature” to whom the Spirit drew grace “in order to give to all those born to life through the spiritual regeneration by water and the Spirit the name of brothers of Him who was First-born.”<sup>51</sup>

The title “First-born of all creation made in Christ” is also to be understood in a particular sense, Gregory maintains. “Since the original creation, rendered useless through sin, passed away, the new creation of life, established through the regeneration and the resurrection from the dead, pointed out the passing of what had been obliterated. Having been the Leader of this life, He is the First-born and He is called so.”<sup>52</sup>

Gregory now briefly reconsiders the same three titles since “they are useful for a life of perfection.” He points out the significance of the first-born as exemplified in Reuben, whose brothers were recognized “because of the similarity according to the form which had been testified,” and reminds Olympius of the obligation which baptism imposes to manifest relationship with Christ by innocence of life. No stain should prevent union with Purity.

Accordingly, if through regeneration in the same manner, by water and the Spirit, we become brothers of the Lord, and through us He becomes the First-born among many brethren, it should follow that we show our kinship with Him through the distinctive marks of our life, our life being formed to that of the First-born of creation. We have often learned from the Scripture what the distinctive marks of that form are: “Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth” (I Peter 2.22).<sup>53</sup>

The other attributes of Christ must likewise be manifest in our lives, for “the First-born is also justice and holiness and love and redemption and other such qualities.” Our lives should give “distinct indications of our nobility” so that those who observe us “will be witnesses to the fact that we are the brothers of Christ.”<sup>54</sup>

By opening for us the gate of the Resurrection, Christ became “the First of those who sleep” and showed thereby that we shall all rise “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet” (I Cor. 15.52). He also showed this by what “He did for others who were held by death,” i.e. those whom He raised from the dead, Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain.<sup>55</sup> “All who have risen from the mound of earth,” however, will not be in the same state in the future life, for Christ says that “we who have done good shall go unto the resurrection of life, but they

<sup>51</sup> 276B-C.

<sup>52</sup> 276C-D.

<sup>53</sup> 276D-277A.

<sup>54</sup> 277A.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. John 11.43 f.; Matt. 9.24-26; Luke 7.11-15.

who have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment (cf. John 5.29). If therefore, one's life looks towards the dreaded condemnation, even though he be numbered with the brethren of the Lord by regeneration, he falsifies the name [of Christ], disowning in the form of evil the right of kinship with the First-born.”<sup>56</sup>

#### CHRIST AS THE MEDIATOR OF GOD AND MAN

In proposing this title Gregory briefly summarizes for Olympius the doctrine of Christ's mediatorship. Christ's office as Mediator proceeds from His human nature, but derives its efficacy from the Divine. Christ is the Mediator of God and man, who by uniting “in Himself the human race to God, unites that alone which would be worthy of the union with God. He associated man to Himself by the power of the Divinity as a part of the common nature so that it would not be subject to the passions of nature which incite it to sin.”

Although Gregory holds that by assuming human nature Christ embraced and elevated all humanity, he clearly states the individual character of Christ's mediatorship, indicating at the same time the necessity of man's efforts in the process of his sanctification. Thus Christ

will also lead men individually to union with the Divinity if they bring on themselves nothing unworthy of union with the Divine. If anyone should be truly a temple of God, containing in himself no idol or image of evil, he will be admitted by the Mediator to association with the Divinity, since he has become pure in order to receive His Purity. For Wisdom, as the saying goes, will not enter into a malicious soul (Wisd. 1.4), and he who is clean of heart sees nothing in himself but God, and clinging to Him by incorruption, he receives in himself every good kingdom.<sup>57</sup>

To clarify this teaching, Gregory directs Olympius' attention to the words Our Lord commanded Mary Magdalen to speak to the apostles: “I go to My Father and to your Father, to My God and to your God” (John 20.17). Gregory explains that it was as the Mediator between the Father and the disinherited sons that Christ spoke these words, for having assumed our nature, He made of it a primal-offering, He sanctified it, preserving it in Himself unmixed with any evil and admitting none. Hence, when He dedicated it through incorruption to the Father of incorruption, He drew together all that was similar according to nature.

Thus He restores to the sonship of God those who were disinherited, and those who were enemies he restores to the participation of the Divinity itself. Therefore, as the

<sup>56</sup> 277B-C.

<sup>57</sup> 277C-D. On Gregory's interpretation of the word “incorruption,” cf. above, II note 9.

primal-offering of our paste has been closely united to the true Father and God, we the paste, should also be reconciled to the Father of incorruption by the innocence and constancy of our Mediator, insofar as it is possible.<sup>58</sup>

#### CHRIST AS THE ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON CROWNED WITH HONOR AND GLORY

By imitating our Mediator, Gregory continues, in taking up the next title, “having by our lives become honor and glory, we shall be a crown of precious stones for the Only-begotten God.” He who, according to Paul, was “a little lower than the angels (cf. Heb. 2.7), because of the death He underwent, . . . made our elders, changed into the nature of a thorn because of sin, as a crown for Himself through His death, having by His suffering changed the thorn into honor and glory.”

By His death Christ took away the sins of the world, and received a crown of thorns in order to make a crown “woven of honor and glory.” There is, nevertheless, Gregory warns Olympius, “no small danger that there be found some thorn because of our evil life,” put in the midst Our Lord’s crown which is made by the communion of His Body.<sup>59</sup>

Various citations from the Scriptures lend emphasis to Gregory’s warning.

In reference to this the just voice speaks positively. “How didst thou come hither without a wedding garment?” (Matt. 12.12) Since you are a thorn, how have you been woven together with those fitted for my crown through honor and glory? “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?” What part has a believer with an infidel? “What is there in common between light and darkness?” (II Cor. 6.15).<sup>60</sup>

Here Gregory again stresses the necessity of purity of life. “We must take care to remove from our whole life every thought, word, and deed full of thorns, so that becoming honor and glory by a pure and innocent manner of life, we may thereby crown the Head of all, becoming, as it were, treasure and wealth for the Master.”<sup>61</sup>

#### CHRIST AS LORD OF GLORY

With this title Gregory lays further stress on the obligation of purity of life, both interiorly and exteriorly. “For He is permitted to be the Lord of no unworthy person, and He is called the Lord of Glory (cf. Ps. 23.8,10).

<sup>58</sup> 277D–280B. In this and in the passage immediately preceding, Gregory gives a clear exposition of his teaching on the divinization of the Christian. On Gregory’s role in the development of this doctrine, cf. J. Gross, *La Divinisation du Chrétien d’après les Pères grecs* (Paris, 1938), pp. 218–235.

<sup>59</sup> 280B–C.

<sup>60</sup> 280C.

<sup>61</sup> 280C–D.

Accordingly, he who both interiorly and exteriorly is alien to ill-behavior and want of decency, makes Him his Master who is and is also called the Lord of Glory, not of dishonor.<sup>62</sup>

#### CHRIST AS THE PRINCIPLE OF BEING

With characteristic disregard for order, Gregory again directs attention to the concept of the primacy of Christ,<sup>63</sup> who, he writes, “is also the Beginning: the Beginning of every deed which is not incongruous.” In accordance with the definition of the Principle, whether it be defined as Life or Light, that which follows from it will be considered life or light. The advantage to be derived in believing that Christ is the Principle, Gregory maintains, is that “we become such as we have believed our Principle to be.” Light is not called the principle of darkness, nor is death considered a continuation of life when life has been directed toward the Principle:

But if anyone is not of the same nature as that which has been established as a guide, and does not adhere to the Principle by innocence and virtue, the Principle of things would not be his principle. The principle of his dark life is the rule of the world of darkness, the principle of death-bearing sin, who has power over death. For He who is the Principle of all good cannot be said to be the principle of one who has by a wicked life established himself under the principle of darkness.<sup>64</sup>

#### CHRIST AS KING OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

Those who take for their profit Christ’s title as King of Justice and Peace, Gregory maintains, are of the same mind with those who have Christ for their Beginning. “For one who prays according to the discipline of praying that the Kingdom of God come in him, understanding that He who is truly king is king of justice and peace, will certainly establish justice and peace in his own life, so that the King of justice and peace may rule over him, as he asks.”<sup>65</sup>

By Kingdom of God Gregory here seems to mean the spiritual reign of God in the individual soul,<sup>66</sup> which, he implies, is to be brought about by warring against Satan. “All virtue,” he writes, “is considered the army of the King, for by justice and peace I believe all virtue should be understood.” One “who has cast away his breast-plate of justice and all the armor of peace,” and deserted to the adversary’s line, “thus becoming the hoplite of

<sup>62</sup> 280D.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. above, p. 195. Saint Paul himself showed no concern for what might be termed chronological order in assigning the various titles to be given to Christ. Cf. Prat (cited above, III note 14), I, 287.

<sup>64</sup> 280D–281A.

<sup>65</sup> 281B. Obviously, *κατὰ τὴν διδασκαλίαν τῆς προσευχῆς* refers to the Lord’s Prayer.

<sup>66</sup> On Saint Paul’s use of this term, cf. Prat (cited above, III note 14), II, 376–381.

the inventor of evil," cannot be assigned under the King of Peace, for he has become an alien to truth. The device of his arms will clearly indicate who his ruler is, although he reveals his leader by the character of his life rather than by the image stamped on his weapons. "He, therefore, is blessed," Gregory adds, "who is drawn up in the divine army and who is assigned to the divisions of those who are numbered in the thousands, since they are armed against evil by the virtues which reveal the image of the King who has clothed them."<sup>67</sup>

"But why," Gregory asks at this point, "is it necessary to carry the discourse further, presenting in the order of their examination all the terms by which the name of Christ is interpreted, by means of which it is possible to lead a life according to virtue, since each name through its proper significance certainly assists us somewhat toward the perfection of life?" It is his belief, he states, repeating what he had expressed at the beginning of the treatise, "that if this is always considered, namely that he who bears the name Christian according to the teaching of the Apostles is a partaker of the adorable name, he will also necessarily reveal the power of the other names by which Christ is considered, since he becomes by his life a participant of each of them."<sup>68</sup>

Gregory then briefly reduces the Christian life to the fundamental processes of thought, speech, and action, insisting on the necessity of their being consciously directed to Christ

For thought is the beginning of every word, and the word is next, disclosing by the voice the thought impressed on the mind. Action has third place, following the thought and the word, leading thought on to operation. Therefore . . . it is well carefully to watch over every thought, word, and deed in reference to these divine concepts by which the Lord is thought of and named, in order that our thoughts, words and deeds may not be carried beyond the power of those lofty names.<sup>69</sup>

Gregory here applies Saint Paul's dictum that "all that is not of faith is a sin" (Rom. 14.23).

Thus it follows, to speak plainly those things which have been clearly thought out, that everything which does not look toward Christ, whether thought, word, or deed, looks away from Him. For he who is without light and life is entirely in darkness and death. If then that which is thought, spoken, and done is not according to Christ, it is conformable to that which is contrary to the good, and what has been shown by these things would be evident to all — namely, that he who becomes separated from Christ by what he thinks, says or does, abandons Christ.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>67</sup> 281B-C.

<sup>68</sup> 281C-D.

<sup>69</sup> 284A.

<sup>70</sup> 284A-B.

He also cites the truth expressed by “the divine voice of the Prophet which says, ‘I have accounted all the sinners of the earth prevaricators’” (Ps. 118.1,19). Gregory holds that he “who denies the truth, or the justice, or the holiness, or the incorruptibility of Christ” is, with him who denies Christ in time of persecution, “a prevaricator of the adorable name.” Likewise he who “would reject any other of the concepts of virtue in the time of mastering his passions is called by the Prophet a transgressor, because by each of these concepts he is letting Him who is all of them slip from his life.”<sup>71</sup>

“What therefore should he do who is deemed worthy of the great name of Christ?” Gregory asks.

“What else,” he replies, “except in everything to examine diligently whether his thoughts, words, and deeds tend toward Christ or away from Him.” He finds great ease in judging such things, “for whatever is thought, spoken or done through some passion is not in harmony with Christ, but bears the mark of the adversary, who by smearing the pearl of the soul with the passions as if with mud, utterly destroys the lustre of the priceless stone.”<sup>72</sup>

Freedom from passion effects in the soul a close resemblance to Christ and brings about complete harmony of the passions.

That which is pure from every passionate disposition looks toward the author of ‘apatheia,’ who is Christ. He who draws to himself thoughts from Him as from a pure and incorruptible fountain will manifest in himself such similarity to the Prototype as the water drawn in a jar has to the water gushing from the fountain. The purity contemplated in Christ and that in the person who participates in it is the same nature. The one, however, gushes forth, while the other, which is a part of it, is drawn from the fountain and conveys to his life beauty in thoughts. As a result, there is harmony between the interior and exterior man, since the decorum of his life corresponds to the thoughts aroused according to Christ.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> 284B.

<sup>72</sup> 284C. The concept of sin expressed here is typical of Greek theology. The Greek Fathers never investigated the inner nature of sin; they speak only of its results. Hence they frequently refer to it as a blot or stain which must be washed away in Christ’s blood. Cf. Rivière (cited above, II note 25), I, 249.

<sup>73</sup> 284D–285A. The word *ἀπάθεια* which Gregory uses here has diverse meanings in the Greek Christian writers, some of whom use it in a definitely neo-platonic sense. In its most general Christian sense, it signifies that state of perfection in which the Christian has gained freedom from the disturbing influences of passion. Cf. G. Bardy, “Apatheia,” in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité, ascétique et mystique*, I, 727–746. According to Muckle (cited above, II note 13), p. 58, it is in this general sense that Gregory uses the term; according to Daniélou (cited above, I note 18), p. 103, Gregory uses it in this particular passage as the equivalent of the divine life, i.e., sanctifying grace. Father Muckle’s objection to Père Daniélou’s interpretation seems to me unwarranted.

Again Gregory sums up his teaching on perfection. "This, therefore, is in my judgment the perfection of the Christian life, that in thought, in speech, and in all the pursuits of life there be a participation in all the names by which the name of Christ is made known so as to preserve perfectly in the entire body, mind, and spirit, without admixture of evil, the holiness praised by Paul."<sup>74</sup>

To the objection that the ideal set forth is too difficult in its demands on our constancy, "since the Lord of creation is alone immutable and human nature is inconstant and inclined toward change," Gregory replies: "No athlete is crowned who does not lawfully strive (cf. II Tim. 2.5), and there would be no lawful contest if there were no adversary with whom to contend. . . Therefore let us struggle against what is changeable in our nature as though with an adversary, wrestling by means of our reason, becoming victors not by casting it (nature) down, but by not acquiescing in the fall." He reminds Olympius that "man has not only a propensity for evil, for if he had by nature an inclination only to evil, it would be impossible for him to turn to the good. Now the most excellent result of putting the enemy to rout is an increase of good, since a change for the better always elevates to more divine things him who has been thus changed."<sup>75</sup>

In concluding, Gregory claims that his treatise has demonstrated that that which seems to be formidable, namely that our nature is changeable, can serve as wings by means of which we fly to better things. To be incapable of being changed for the better would be a loss for us. He, therefore, who sees in our nature a tendency toward change should not grieve, but being changed always for the better and transformed from glory unto glory, let him be so changed through daily increase as to become daily better and ever more perfect, persuaded that he has never arrived at the measure of perfection. Now, true perfection never stands still, but is always growing toward the better: perfection is limited by no boundaries.<sup>76</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Saint Gregory of Nyssa as heir of the Christian tradition in the fourth century based his spiritual doctrine on the Scriptures. Like Basil, he found in the New Testament the inspiration and principles of the spiritual life, which they both held was but the perfection of the Christian life. Gregory, however, gave greater emphasis than Basil to the mystical aspect of this life, having directed his spiritual teaching along the lines begun by Origen, who with Clement of Alexandria had begun to elaborate a theology of the spiritual life together with a system of dogmatic theology.

<sup>74</sup> 285A.

<sup>75</sup> 285A-C.

<sup>76</sup> 285C-D.

The impact of the Arian, Apollinarian, and Macedonian heresies on Christian thought had resulted in the crystallization of the great dogmas of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, as the writings of the period testify. Those of Saint Athanasius and Saint Basil are noteworthy, and the influence of these two great teachers on Gregory's thought is no less evident than that of Origen. But Gregory had his own distinctive contribution to make. He corrected what was erroneous in Origen's Christological teaching and developed it further. In his refutation of the Eunomian heresy he not only emphasized the Divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, but definitely established the incomprehensibility of God, pointing out that the knowledge we have of God other than that of the intellect is the result of His presence in us by grace, and that this is properly the domain of the mystical life. Many passages of the *Contra Eunomium* reecho in the *De Perfectione*.

Those versed in the Platonic tradition recognized in the material presented in the preceding pages the survival of that tradition in Gregory. Like Plato, he compares human passions to wild beasts and introduces the figure of the painter to clarify his teaching. There are also numerous borrowings from Plato's vocabulary: αἴρεσις, ἀλήθεια, ἀπάθεια, ἀρετή, ἀρχή, ἀφθαρσία, βίος, δικαιοσύνη, εἰκών, ἐπιθυμία, ἡγεμονία, ἡσυχία, θεωρία, κάθαρσις, κουωνία, μελέτη, μίμησις, νοῦς, ὁμοιότης, τελειότης, φύσις, and χαρακτήρ. Gregory, however, does not use these expressions in the Platonic sense; in his writings they have a distinctively Christian coloring. They had become a part of the philosophical language of the time, and as such Gregory felt no hesitation in using them to express Christian thought.<sup>1</sup>

The most striking feature of the two treatises, but particularly of the *De Perfectione*, is Gregory's Christological emphasis. To his mind, the Christian is one who has been united to Christ by faith in Him, and who manifests his participation in Christ by the practice of all the virtues Christ practiced. These are made known by "the various sublime names applied to Christ."

<sup>1</sup> Père Daniélou (cited above, I note 18, p. 8 f.) writes: "Nous avions été surtout frappé, à la première lecture de l'œuvre de Grégoire de Nysse, du nombre considérable d'expressions et même de développements empruntés à la langue platonicienne, philonienne, plotinienne. Une lecture plus approfondie nous a fait découvrir, sous ce revêtement, une expérience et une doctrine authentiquement chrétienne . . . Ainsi l'étude de tous les textes nous a convaincu qu'il n'y avait pas lieu de chercher quels étaient les éléments platoniciens de la pensée de Grégoire, mais qu'il fallait nous habituer à cette vue d'une pensée purement chrétienne, mais qui a emprunté ses formes d'expression à la langue philosophique du temps où elle s'est constituée." Père Mersch (cited above, III note 48, p. 322) is of the same mind. "Platonist philosophy may have furnished for him [Gregory], as for others, a systematic method and facilitated the conceptual expression of the truth, but we do not see that it exerted any influence upon the teaching itself."

It is my opinion that the *De Professione* precedes the *De Perfectione* by an indefinite number of years.<sup>2</sup> Although based on Scripture, the former emphasizes the necessity of man's efforts in purifying his soul, and attributes great importance to the will. The role of the devil as the adversary of God is stressed, and the general tone of the treatise is apologetic.

The *De Perfectione* is based entirely on the great Christological texts of Saint Paul, whom Gregory considers the safest guide for the Christian in his efforts to imitate Christ. Sanctification is viewed not only in terms of free will, but in terms of Christ's operations in the soul.

The role of Christ as Redeemer and Mediator is emphasized, and there is one poignantly beautiful passage in which Gregory's treatment of Our Lord's sufferings during His Passion anticipates that of the medieval writers. The virtues so conspicuous in Christ during His Passion — meekness, patience, forgiveness of injuries — are to be dominant in the life of the Christian. The sacramental aspect of the spiritual life is brought out clearly in the references to Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, and the significance of the doctrine of the Mystical Body for those striving for close union with Christ is explained. They are members of Christ's body and must be in complete union with Him, the pure Head of that Body. Freedom from passion effects in the soul a close resemblance to Christ and the purity of the Christian soul is of the same nature as Christ's purity. Christ's purity, however, is as a fountain, gushing forth; the Christian's is like the water drawn from that fountain. To be deemed worthy of the name of Christian one has only to see to it that his thoughts, words, and deeds are in harmony with Christ's.

Both treatises close with an answer to the objection that the ideals of the Christian life are too lofty. Christ has promised to give great things in exchange for small, Gregory reminds Harmonius, heavenly things in exchange for earthly, and everlasting in return for those that perish quickly. Harmonius has only to rely on that promise. Olympius is reminded that no athlete is crowned without a genuine struggle. The changeableness of his nature need not distress him, for it is that very capacity for change which is a guarantee of progress in the spiritual life. True perfection never stands still, nor has it limits or boundaries.

<sup>2</sup> The exact chronology of all of Gregory's writings is not known.